BY WHAT STRANGE CHANNELS: NICHOLAS MOSLEY'S LITERARY CIRCUITS

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In May of 1988, nine years after his novel *Catastrophe Practice* was first published in England, British author Nicholas Mosley wrote a letter to John O'Brien, founder of Dalkey Archive Press and editor of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. By 1988, Dalkey Archive Press had published two of Mosley's books in the United States and was now preparing to publish *Catastrophe Practice*. Mosley's letter to O'Brien is a "brief progress report" to the American publisher, in which Mosley takes a moment to describe the results of an "intensive spell" he had just spent revising his book: "the whole thing has more internal liveliness and consistency, and thus, with luck, might after all hit the outside world with more impact."[1] After an interlude of nine years—and the publication of three more books in what became his Catastrophe Practice series—Mosley's return to *Catastrophe Practice* derives from two sources: his desire to rework the aesthetic text and from the more external impetus of a forthcoming American edition of the book. To these ends, Mosley's processes of revision bring together complementary aspects of literature: the aesthetic economy of texts and the material processes of literary production, distribution, and reception. In short, Mosley's letter suggests how the text's "internal liveliness" is affected by and tests the literary practices by which it travels. By what strange channels, Mosley later asks, do his texts find their way in the world? And in what form do such channels return his work to him? With scrupulous attentiveness to these questions, Mosley's work considers the conceptual and material matters of literature, matters of both medium and message, that constitute the complementarity of literature and literary production.[2]

When Mosley returned to *Catastrophe Practice* in 1988, his revisions stemmed as much from the book's unique position in his body of work as from any inconsistency in its conception. *Catastrophe Practice* is the first book of the five-book Catastrophe Practice series, which concludes with

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the award-winning *Hopeful Monsters*, first published in 1990.[3] At the time of his letter to O'Brien, Mosley had recently completed *Hopeful Monsters*, and in April of 1988 Mosley told O'Brien that he thought "this last book—*Hopeful Monsters*—will make the scheme of the whole if not exactly clear, at least there to be found with enthusiasm by anyone who cares to look."[4] The exigency for Mosley's return to *Catastrophe Practice* thus issues from the circularity built into Mosley's serial form. While *Catastrophe Practice* was the first book in the series to be published, the narrative events within *Catastrophe Practice* take place last. Analogously, the events in *Hopeful Monsters* precede the events in the other four books, even though *Hopeful Monsters* concludes the series. The Catastrophe Practice series interchanges beginnings and ends, perplexing seriality and calling to mind the "commodius vicus of recirculation"[5] with which James Joyce describes the circular structure *Finnegans Wake*. In a similarly circular gesture, Mosley revisits the inaugural book of the series only once he has written the subsequent four books. His return to the original book commences another beginning, but a beginning made possible through the sequences and consequences of the other books.

Mosley's return to the origin of the Catastrophe Practice series offers a suitably byzantine entry point into a critical interpretation of his work. Even if his desire to rework the initial installment of the series follows from the recursive methods of literary work in general, Mosley's careful attention to these recursive processes underwrites his particular literary project. Mosley develops a method of trial and error, whereby the indeterminate text and the wandering textual object ultimately converge to produce results. These results, however, must always be prone to revision. When *Catastrophe Practice* returns to Mosley via an interested American publisher, Mosley responds to its return as a manifestation of the unpredictable ends of literary circulation. This is to say that, as Mosley reworks his aesthetic text, he also works through the structures and practices that set his text in circulation. Accordingly, Mosley invites his readers to encounter his work with an eye as much to the aesthetic economy of his text as to the material practices that channel the book-object into the world.

Mosley's effort to think through the complementary aspects of literary aesthetics and literary practices perplexes Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the literary field, which Bourdieu sees as being constituted by processes of aesthetic, material, and symbolic "position-takings."[6] Bourdieu argues that the position-takings by which literary autonomy develops must be underwritten by the pursuit of symbolic capital, whether the literary artist is conscious of that pursuit or not. Authors can afford to reject economic interests and produce art only for other producers—a key aspect of Bourdieu's sphere of restricted

production—because such limitations produce the symbolic capital with which an artist achieves consecration and even economic success. So while the sphere of restricted production is based on "a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies," it still works by an economy of symbolic capital. Furthermore, although Bourdieu argues that the "autonomy of a field of restricted production can be measured by its power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products," he also proposes that this "implies translation of all external determinations in conformity with its own principles of functioning."[7] According to this argument, a field of restricted production can define its own criteria for evaluation and production, but those criteria are *systematic inversions*, or translations, of external determinations. *Aesthetic autonomy*, in short, is a translated expression of "external determinations," where we might translate "external" as "economic," and "determinations" as "determinism." For Bourdieu, literary autonomy operates by way of a market logic, however inverted it might be. The indeterminacy of aesthetic texts and literary practices has no place here, where everything is accounted for. Mosley's literary complementarity differs from the constitutive processes of Bourdieu's literary field in that it accepts both the indeterminate economy of aesthetic texts and the indeterminate ends of textual objects. Mosley's work offers a less restricted alternative to Bourdieu's grasp of the processes that constitute the literary field.

With *Catastrophe Practice*, Mosley initiates his reflections on literary processes by showing that even the individual book is multiple, a point he tests through the development of the series. *Catastrophe Practice*, which collects three plays, four essays, and a short novel, engages the complementarity between the singularity of the book and the multiplicity of the text. The book and its paratextual markers limit the text's indeterminacy by giving it distinct form and making the text into an identifiable object.[8] At the same time, the book circulates in the world and broadcasts the text within a literary field. When I refer to the singularity of the book, then, I mean to suggest that the book-object is singular in that it restrains the text's indeterminacy. But the singular book is also errant. It follows strange channels, some of which are created by the very text it carries, and so the ends of the book in circulation must be left open to chance. Following this logic, one should resist reading Mosley's return to *Catastrophe Practice* in the late 1980s as a discrete act of revision, where Mosley tinkers with a few words to add consistency to the whole. Rather, *Catastrophe Practice* shows us Mosley thinking through literature, via its filters and strange channels, as both a regulatory and propagative system.

Although authors, translators, publishers, and reviewers have a vested interest in responding to the processes of literary circulation, academic interest in literary production and mediation has only recently caught up to contemporary literature, particularly in relation to debates about world literature.[9] However, such debates have often played out in terms of translation into and out of English and French, leaving little room for a scarcely translated English-language author such as Mosley. Yet Mosley's work illustrates the broader interactions taking place between contemporary literary aesthetics and literary practices, even if the critical idiom of translation is not immediately at stake. In the following, then, I look at the circuitous mediations found within Mosley's work to propose that Mosley develops his aesthetic by means of a critical emphasis on circularity and circulation, which bears the logic not only of a deep literary history—Sir Thomas Browne, Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, and Jorge Luis Borges—but also of a metaliterary focus on the physical processes of literary exchange.[10] I propose that Mosley's reflections on the circulation of the book-object show that his thought is shaped by the logic of literary production: he returns to *Catastrophe Practice* via the feedback loops of trial and error that make up the literary field, for the field of literature functions more like a circuit, or a system, than an open field. It is a field shot through with strange channels, some of which are the very books it puts into circulation. With literary scholarship turning more toward media theory and the reclamation of materialist approaches to literature, a present return to the work of Nicholas Mosley reminds us that the medium is, indeed, part of the message, even if the message is late on arrival. This is to say, it is time that literary scholarship caught up with the work of Nicholas Mosley.

Mosley's Circuitous Mediations

When Mosley introduces the 1991 Dalkey Archive Press reissue of *Catastrophe Practice*, he implies the subtle similarities between his theory of literature and his revisionary practice. In his introduction, Mosley observes that "*Catastrophe Practice* was the first book to be written in the series that carries its name. It was a seed for the other books—*Imago Bird* [1980], *Serpent* [1981], *Judith* [1986], *Hopeful Monsters* [1990]. It was to be seen as a seed; but a seed is perhaps best looked at after its fruits."[11] Using horticultural metaphors that he attends to throughout the series, Mosley hints at the generative logic of the serial form. *Catastrophe Practice* is the seed for the books that follow, but the seed manifests its potential

only through its subsequent generations. To pare Mosley's metaphor, the thought within the initial book is processed through the books that follow it. Through a recursive loop, *Catastrophe Practice* becomes the first and sixth books of the Catastrophe Practice series. It becomes both origin and culmination, undermining the terminal logic in both. By threading the needle of two such determinate points, *Catastrophe Practice* emerges as the interminable continuation of the book's unknown future. The resultant temporal vertigo gives us every reason to continue returning to Mosley's texts and offers access to Mosley's circuitous mediations. The next three sections of this essay focus on Mosley's texts and the manner in which they attend to mediation, particularly as mediation relates to the complementarity between literary aesthetics and literary practices. Only after a close consideration of the ideas developed within Mosley's aesthetic texts does the essay return to Mosley's interest in the errant paths of textual objects.

If thinking through *Catastrophe Practice* results in temporal confusions, it is due in part to Mosley's refusal to make the book discrete. Although designated "a novel" on the cover of its current Dalkey edition, *Catastrophe Practice* incorporates multiple literary forms. In four essays, three plays, and a short novel, all of which are interrelated, *Catastrophe Practice* outlines Mosley's interest in the book as a sort of compendium that gathers multiplicity. The plays, which Mosley calls "Plays for Not Acting," include *Skylight*, *Landfall*, and *Cell*, in that order. Mosley introduces each play with a dense theoretical essay. Additionally, the plays form a series, with the same actors playing different roles in each and with specific themes and portions of dialogue occurring repeatedly throughout. Following the three plays, Mosley includes a further essay in which he elaborates on some of the themes within the related plays. Finally, Mosley concludes the volume with a short novel, *Cypher*, which extends the series of plays by telling the stories of the actors' lives offstage. Given the novel's title, *Cypher*, one might expect it to offer a map to the mazes set up in the plays. But, as Mosley notes, a cipher—to use the American English spelling—is something that adds to rather than diminishes complexity: "[a] manner of writing intelligible to those possessing the key . . . also . . . the key to such a system."[12] In the context of *Catastrophe Practice*, *Cypher* works as both: it opens up other texts within the book, but does so by extending the very system it helps to access.

Instead of functioning as discrete works within the book, the plays act as structures through which actors circulate. Six actors play a total of eighteen roles across the three plays. The list of characters for the first play is straightforward: "Ackerman, Helena, Judith, Jason, Ariel, Jenny."[13]

By the third play, however, the list of characters signals the complex distributions taking place within *Catastrophe Practice*:

Anderson	who played	Ariel and Bert
Hortense	who played	Judith and the Older Hostess
The Moor	who played	Ackerman and the Barman
Dionysus	who played	Jason and Harry
Florence	who played	Helena and the Char
Siva	who played	Jenny and the Younger Hostess[14]

Instead of adding stability through triangulation, the tripartite roles complicate the notion of the singular role as such. A given actor does not simply play all three roles. Instead, the convoluted dramatis personae suggests that the new character in the third play played the roles contained within the former two plays. Dionysus might have been beneath the masks that were Jason and Harry, while Ariel and Bert were actually Anderson in disguise. The enigmatic cast requires readers to sift through the plays in order to figure out what happens and what the relations among the ensemble might be. For Mosley's part, he casts *Catastrophe Practice* as an ensemble text. It both gathers and produces multiplicity.

In the structure of the plays, we find a clue to Mosley's riddle: the plays not only enact the systematic connections; they also constitute the system of connections in themselves. Mosley emphasizes his attention to systems, networks, and circuits throughout the series, and especially in the essays he includes in *Catastrophe Practice*. In his untitled introduction to the third play, *Cell*, Mosley outlines the strategy of his project:

> By the cultivation of a ground for a new style of thinking one might find that seeds suited to it that have been blown there by chance have become established and have grown there because of effort. There are such seeds—how else could one have the idea of such a ground? So—Dig for Circuitry! for recognition of complexity![15]

Mosley's exhortation to "Dig for Circuitry!" appears to oppose his more georgic appeal to cultivate ground for new seeds, but rather than thinking of technology and earthly cultivation as oppositional, Mosley understands them as forms of complementary layering. The technological metaphor, after all, need not overpower the agrarian: we dig for circuitry so that seeds blown in by chance might grow.

In his mixed metaphors for the elaboration of critical thought, we find a subtle example of Mosley's appeal: complementary metaphors acknowledge thought's ability to embrace patterns and complexity, for metaphor itself carries thought between analogous ideas or objects.[16] Metaphor transfers thought and is thought. Mosley's plea to dig for circuitry expresses a metaphoric understanding of the structures of thought itself. Later in the same introduction, Mosley returns to his circuits. This time, Mosley echoes strains of Nietzschean thought:

> [I]t is by your mistakes that you learn: it is by being free to face what is "bad" that you can learn that it suits you to try to stick with what is "good": that is this sort of freedom—trial and error, circuitry—that is the only way of becoming something out of reach of the rules of slavery.[17]

For Mosley, circuitry couples with trial and error because it retains the logic of return and of going back to begin again. In a similar manner, Mosley's book functions as a system of circuits whose repetitive, circuitous structure sends the reader on feedback loops of trial and error.

Mosley elaborates on the complementary aspects of his thought and his books in his autobiography, *Efforts at Truth* (1995).[18] Reflecting on the development of *Catastrophe Practice*, Mosley recalls that, after writing the first two plays,

> It seemed that I would have to write a third play to go with *Skylight* and *Landfall*, so that the actors could form some circuit; so that there could be some structure within which, from which, whatever new liveliness there might be might take root and grow. In the mind, of course, in the mind. This third play was to be called *Cell*—something in which you are locked up; also that within and from which new life may break out.[19]

Here, the actors and the plays form a structure "within which, from which" liveliness might spring. Liveliness inhabits structure, and feedback loops of trial and error within a system enable the dynamic extension of the system. The plays test thought by testing the critical complementarity of Mosley's reiterated coupling: within which, from which. How does a critical focus on one aspect of this coupling obscure the other aspect? And how does this obscurity—this working in the dark—relate to

literary indeterminacy, both aesthetic and material? For Mosley, the pairing shows how playful circuits constitute structure and play, testing both while privileging neither. This is the dynamic within which and from which Mosley's complementarity works.

Mosley's Present Passages

John O'Brien first discovered Nicholas Mosley's work through his friend, Gilbert Sorrentino. Sorrentino, the American novelist and poet, had been exchanging letters with O'Brien for nearly three years by the time of his February 1974 letter, in which Sorrentino writes,

> If you can, get a book (Coward-McCann) called *Impossible Object* [1968] by Nicholas Mosley. It is extraordinary and brilliant. You see how everything conspires to keep these remarkable writers under wraps. He's British and has been publishing novels for apparently 20 years or so. But read it yourself. What a pleasure to see a conscious artist at work.[20]

O'Brien was equally impressed by Mosley's work and by the late 1970s had undertaken to interview Mosley in a series of letters.

In the interview conducted by O'Brien between 1977 and 1978, just as Mosley was completing *Catastrophe Practice*, Mosley remarks that

> what is no longer of interest is "what happens next" but—what is happening now. . . . (You can make up anything as what's going to happen next: then when it doesn't, that's tragic!) But "what is happening now" is a true form of enquiry.[21]

To resist the "what happens next" approach to literature, Mosley makes *Catastrophe Practice* into a formal challenge of narrative development. Certainly, one can find moments in Mosley's works where the narrative seems to move forward, but Mosley continually impedes such progression by looping back or drawing in decontextualized passages. In crafting a narrative style that continually loops back on itself and often appears to stall completely before finding new directions, Mosley emphasizes process over progress. He focuses on the presence of the text, or the present text, as the most permeable place, or permeable temporality, for inquiry and observation.

Mosley's focus on the present is most evident in the formal protocols of the "Plays for Not Acting." Plays, after all, tend to present narrative action in the present tense. Mosley taps drama's narrative form and favors narrative description over dialogue throughout the sequence. In this fairly typical example of the style of Mosley's plays, he emphasizes the present tense and suggests that one must sift through present information in search of signs and signals:

> Ackerman turns and looks at Jenny. He acts, somewhat clumsily, as if he is pulled each way between Ariel and Jenny. Then Ariel falls, heavily, on to his face on the swing sofa. The sofa bounces, and becomes still. Jenny stands. She turns and looks at Ariel. Ackerman goes to the balustrade at the back and looks over.
>
> Ackerman Did you hear it? Some signal. Some sign. They're all around, like wolves.
>
> Jenny comes and kneels by Ariel. Ackerman looks at the audience.[22]

Here, the brevity and simple syntax of Mosley's sentences stress the presence of the passage. Present tenses pile up and most follow directly after the subject of the sentence: Ackerman turns, he acts, Ariel falls, the sofa bounces, and so on. Ackerman looks at Jenny and then looks out at the audience, an action Mosley's characters repeat throughout the three plays. His characters busy themselves with the present act of watching, observing, and looking. From the almost programmatic presentness of the passage, Ackerman's snippet of dialogue sifts for information: "Did you hear it? Some signal. Some sign." Within a torrent of present-tense action and movement, Ackerman attempts to find a clear signal in what otherwise emerges as the noise of the present, thus emulating Mosley's understanding of the literary encounter.

Mosley again stresses his attention to present observation in the final critical essay in *Catastrophe Practice*. In this passage, Mosley reflects on the "Plays for not Acting," in which characters continually think of themselves as actors, purposefully stumble over their lines, and try to act as if not acting at all:

> In the attempt of an actor to move between what acting is and what it is not—and by doing so to demonstrate "truth"—there would have to be something of the

> self-questioning of Brecht's Chinese actor who "expresses his awareness of being observed . . . observes himself . . . will occasionally look at the audience and say 'Isn't it just like that?'": a question not of—What will happen next?—but of—What is happening now?—the former involving helplessness (though perhaps comfort in helplessness) because the answer is unknowable; the latter involving pleasure in prospects, because the facts for hypotheses and testing are there. There would be a going-round, a sifting, a searching . . . to see what in the end, as in a riddle, is left.[23]

According to Mosley, attentiveness to "what is happening now" in literature untethers the reader from the helplessness Mosley associates with future-oriented thinking. And while one could argue that paying too much attention to the present would eliminate critical distance, Mosley suggests that attention to the present in literature facilitates self-reflection and critical distance. As Allen Dunn argues in an introductory essay to Mosley's work, "For Mosley, the act of self-reflection creates a space between the observer and the forces that would constrain her. His hope is that 'By being aware of one's own programming . . . one might also be apart from it.'"[24] Similarly, Mosley proposes that being attentive to what is at hand entails an appreciation of the "pleasure in prospects, because the facts for hypotheses and testing are there." Here, Mosley orients the present toward hypothetical potentialities rather than endorsing a view of the future as either a prescriptive projection or a tragic impossibility. Sensing the potentiality of the given, or giving one's attention to the thinking system, establishes a relation between present and future where the future is understood to exist in the facts, objects, and patterns at hand. Mosley's emphasis on present time thus connects pattern recognition and misrecognition, hypotheses and testing, to the present means of the literary encounter. Readers of the play observe what is at hand, on the page or on the stage. They make of it what they can as they look for some signal in the flux of the present.

Whereas the unknowable future places humans in a position of powerlessness and resignation, attention to what is present, according to Mosley, enables us to observe ourselves observing and to observe ourselves being observed. In his epigraph to *Catastrophe Practice*, Mosley quotes Nietzsche, asking, "What meaning would our whole being possess if it were not this—that in us the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a problem."[25] Mosley adopts a version of this idea in his first essay, where he outlines his view of self-conscious acting:

> An actor comes on: he is watched: he watches himself being watched: those who watch, watch him watching. This is a person's predicament—what is an act, what is not: what is "true", what is "false": not what will happen next, but what is happening now. This is a person's experience of himself; through it, his experience of everything. And being shown this, a member of an audience might indeed recognise himself—might even be encouraged to change—being presented with an experience of—not acting.[26]

For Mosley, the power of thought resides not just in the patterns it might identify, but in the contemporaneous moment of observation, in the ability to observe. The result of such observation is not the true or the false verdict that leads to action, but the recognition of the partial passivity that is itself the act of observing. As Mosley playfully notes, the observer might experience himself, might even change, by being presented with an experience of *not acting*. The change Mosley references is not the change of future-oriented action; rather, change results from the partially passive, partially active act of contemporary observation. Mosley concentrates on the present and its contexts so that his book becomes "a going-round, a sifting, a searching . . . to see what in the end, as in a riddle, is left." Or, as one of the young protagonists in *Hopeful Monsters* contemplates, "Was it true that if one made one's mind blank then . . . images might fall through?"[27]

Poring Over, Passing Through

With *Catastrophe Practice*, Mosley attempts to make his texts legible as riddles, as apparatuses (both text and textual object) through which information passes and passes away. In his epigraph to *Skylight*, Mosley invokes the link between the verb, to riddle, and the material object from which it derives: "a coarse-meshed sieve, used to separate sand from gravel, ashes from cinders, etc."[28] Mosley thus draws on the material riddle, the instrument, when he prefaces his first play with the verb form: "Riddle. . . . to separate chaff from corn, ashes from cinders etc. . . . test (evidence, truth)."[29] Like a sieve, a riddle separates material. The most provocative and useful aspect of "riddle" for our purposes is that riddling both allows matter to pass through and blocks matter from passing through. Riddling also has literary precedents: Oedipus and the riddle of the Sphinx come to mind. Oedipus answers the Sphinx's riddle and is allowed to pass

into Thebes. The riddle is both a puzzle and an apparatus for narrative passage. Following from this, the solution to the riddle is not the point of the riddle; rather, the riddle figures the concept of narrative passage as such, as information and characters either pass through or fail to. For Mosley, the process of riddling, sifting, and searching constitutes the literary encounter.

By fashioning his book as an apparatus through which material pours, Mosley asks the reader to continue poring over the text. I use this expression—to pore over a text—quite deliberately here precisely because Mosley conceptualizes *Catastrophe Practice* as a riddle. Even if the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers no etymological evidence to suggest that the verb *pore* is related either to porousness or to pouring, as in water through a sieve, we still profit by considering such homophonic layering in relation to Mosley's work. Midway through the play for which *riddle* serves as an epigraph, one of the central figures looks out into the audience in a moment of Brechtian alienation:

> Jason looks at the audience. Then he puts out his hand against the vertical plane above the footlights as if he were feeling there a glass partition or a screen.
>
> JASON Shake it—
> JUDITH Like a cage—
> JASON A sieve—
> JUDITH A riddle—
> JASON A heartbeat.[30]

While Mosley's descriptive directions suggest that the vertical partition is either a glass or a screen, Jason and Judith's exchange makes it clear that the partition is a screen. They want to shake the divider in order to make the cage a sieve. Just as Jason and Judith turn a moment of observation—of looking through the screen—into a moment of sifting, so, too, Mosley emphasizes the sievelike operations of the text through which thought is channeled.

The endless riddling in *Catastrophe Practice* expresses Mosley's proposition that the ends of literary production are critically indeterminate. This is not to say that literature has no effects, but that its effects cannot be determined in advance. In a scene from *Skylight*, Jason speaks to one of the other five major characters in the play, an older gentleman named Ackerman, and wonders what aspects of the play might get through to the audience:

> Ackerman and Jason wait. They watch the audience.
>
> Ackerman One or two—
> Jason Get through.[31]

One or two get through. As simple as the phrase sounds, it appears in various contexts throughout *Catastrophe Practice* and serves as Mosley's critical refrain. Like many other expressions in the book, "one or two get through" surfaces from the chaff of its contexts. At times, it makes perfect sense in the play's dialogue. At other times, the phrase appears out of place, impeding rather than easing the passage of narrative. Implying passage and blockage, the phrase condenses Mosley's contention that texts, like textual objects, cannot determine their ends but rather function as the machinery for sifting.

The phrase "one or two get through" becomes central to Mosley's body of work because it asserts that an encounter with literature—a text, a play, an essay—produces something, but what it produces is contingent on the kind of questions one asks. Moreover, the thought it produces necessarily obscures other thought. Here, we find Mosley's theory of literary complementarity at work. Mosley adopts this line of thought from quantum theory, particularly from Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity. Bohr developed his principle of complementarity through his "double-slit experiment" in which he attempted to determine how particles could act both like waves and particles simultaneously.[32] By performing his experiment in which projected particles would pass through one of two slits in a screen before collecting on a detector, Bohr came to a conclusion he eventually called *complementarity*. David Kaiser gives a useful summary of Bohr's more difficult explanation:

> To Bohr, the paradox of the slit detector exemplified a more general feature of quantum mechanics. Ask a "particle-like" question—"through which slit did the particle pass?"—and you will always receive a particle-like answer ("slit A" or "slit B"). Ask a "wave-like" question—"how does [the wavefunction] behave in the region between the slits and the detectors?"—and you will always receive a wavelike response. . . . Bohr coined the term "complementarity" for his emerging philosophy.[33]

At around the same time Bohr developed his theory of complementarity, Werner Heisenberg established his *uncertainty principle*, in which he argues that

> certain pairs of quantities, such as position and momentum or energy and time, could never be specified with unlimited precision at a single instant. The more precisely a quantum object's position was specified, the less precisely its momentum could be, and vice versa. According to Heisenberg, in other words, we can never know exactly where an object is and where it is going at the same time.[34]

Mosley's "one or two," which echoes the language of Bohr's slit-screen experiments, indicates the complementarity and uncertainty at play in literary experimentation. Mosley's theory of literary complementarity asks how literary processes feed into thought and its contingencies, for the phrase itself, "one or two," is both singular and multiple. The result depends on the approach. One cannot determine which one or two get through, or the ultimate direction of those that get through, because the answer emerges from the critical encounter between the observer and the apparatus. In this case, the Catastrophe Practice series functions as the apparatus.

Mosley strengthens his identification with quantum theory in a *Hopeful Monsters* scene in which Max Ackerman, one of the two protagonists in the book and one of several protagonists in the series, watches a group of children pushing tires up a hill. One child is much smaller than the others, causing Ackerman to comment on the child's Sisyphean task. Ackerman then reconsiders: "Or this is like one of those experiments in which you bombard with particles a small aperture in a screen and it is according either to chance or to how you have set up the experiment what, if anything, gets through."[35] Here, Mosley fairly accurately describes the fundamental question at the core of Bohr's complementarity: How do the parameters of the experiment affect the results? And how do contingency and indeterminacy inhabit a functioning apparatus? As Mosley answers, what gets through does so according to chance or to how one sets up the experiment. Mosley's work plays on the tension between chance and structure, between random occurrence and occurrence influenced by the apparatus itself. He cannot choose one over the other. Rather, like Bohr proposes, chance and apparatus function in terms of complementarity. If one looks at a specific element of the literary experiment, something continues to happen elsewhere, offstage, in secret.[36] Darkness and chance are, oddly, the unknowable parts of the experiment itself as well as its potentiality. For Mosley, experiments produce their own unknowns. Focusing on one aspect of an experiment obscures another aspect, and so complementarity figures

as the endlessly productive potentiality of literature itself, both in the aesthetic economy of the text and in the processes of literary production.

Mosley's Book to Come

In an essay collected in his volume *Does Writing Have a Future?* (2011), Vilém Flusser characterizes a *publisher* as a "grid in the stream of texts whose duty is to block most texts from getting into print. The vast swell of printed texts in which we currently swim is just the tip of an iceberg of texts that did not succeed in passing through the grid."[37] Here, Flusser's publishing industry mirrors Mosley's sievelike book. When Mosley models his book as a riddle, he invokes not only the recursive strategies within his circuitous texts. Like Flusser, he reminds us that the book also moves through material literary circuits as a means of testing thought. One acquires a sense of the contours of the grid by observing what passes through it and what does not. In short, structures within the literary field complement Mosley's theory of literature, merging Mosley's riddling books with the processes of literary circulation.

The argument that scholars can approach a book through its material history is very much indebted to the discipline of book history. As Peter McDonald has pointed out, however, book historians tend to situate book history as the empirical antidote to the fervently theoretical and "ahistorical" atmosphere of literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s.[38] McDonald revisits the separation between book history and literary theory, describing it as the unfortunate result of a struggle for academic literary hegemony.[39] Now that the heady antagonism between book history and literary theory—particularly post-structuralism—has abated, McDonald proposes that revisiting the correspondences between the two will help scholars to navigate the Scylla and Charybdis found at the heart of literary scholarship. Post-structuralist theory will earn its revival through nuanced materialist and structuralist approaches, and the too staid field of book history will be reanimated by the specter of Jacques Derrida.

McDonald makes his argument by shuttling between two extremes. On the one hand, post-structuralist theory is charged with an overzealous approach to literary antiessentialism. In what McDonald calls an enchanted antiessentialist argument, one cannot claim "great literature," because "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte," a phrase Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translates as "There is nothing outside the text," and Derek Attridge translates as "There is no outside-the-text."[40] On the other hand, book

history's empirical rigor in describing every last detail of a material text, which Johanna Drucker dubs "thelanguageofthickdescription,"[41] pays too little attention to the text as opposed to the textual object. McDonald calls this second group the "skeptical antiessentialists."[42] McDonald attempts to unite the skeptical and enchanted antiessentialists by pointing out that Derrida's "hors-texte" is actually a pun, which sets "*hors-texte*, a technical bookmaking term roughly translated as 'plate' (as in 'This book contains five color plates'), alongside *hors texte*, which Attridge's translation comes closest to capturing."[43] Here, McDonald challenges what some have come to understand as the ahistorical tendencies of post-structuralist theory, especially as those tendencies have found their call to arms in Derrida's expression. For, as McDonald points out, Derrida's famed phrase concentrates on the encounter between a text and its production, an idea Derrida will return to throughout his career, especially in a work such as *Archive Fever* (1995).[44]

McDonald's argument suggests that Derrida's famous phrase is less an abrupt break with history than a significant consideration of the complementary aspects of material and textual impression. Like Flusser and Mosley, Derrida asserts that material processes impress themselves upon a text. And like Flusser and Mosley, he understands that the text also impresses itself upon those processes as it tests the structure of the literary field. Flusser elaborates most clearly on the mutual impressions between a text and its publisher, suggesting that the grid of the publishing field is formed by the texts that pass through it:

> At the moment, publishers are still sufficiently elastic to adjust themselves to suit some of the texts. . . . This dialogue between texts and publisher may sometimes change the publishing criteria, but it also changes texts. That is, after all, the essence of dialogue: the participant becomes the other of the other, himself changing by changing another. A printed text is not only one that has changed (moved, impressed) the publisher, but also one that has been changed (moved, impressed) by the publisher.[45]

Similar to Mosley and Derrida, Flusser locates mutual impression in the text's movement through the literary field. The text can change the field and be changed by it. The text, in this account, is both active and passive. For Mosley and his theoretical interlocutors, mutual impression between literary practices and literary texts makes literature endlessly productive.

McDonald, for example, admires Pierre Bourdieu's outline of the literary field, which Bourdieu conceives of as the wide array of institutions and apparatuses that makes literary production possible. Yet McDonald also contends that Bourdieu's conception of the literary field is too restricted. As he clarifies,

> Bourdieu's skeptical antiessentialism remains limited insofar as it addresses only one side of literature's double challenge. By privileging the historically specific norms and categories of the field, without which literature as such could not exist, it underestimates the unpredictability of writing, which is always capable of transforming the field by exceeding or subverting its determinations.[46]

For McDonald, Bourdieu errs on the side of description and, in doing so, fails to acknowledge the unpredictability inscribed in the text itself. With this essay, I offer Mosley as a figure whose work demonstrates the process of thinking through literature's double challenge: the desire for material and historical specificity and the acknowledgment of the indeterminate text. Mosley's work responds to writing's ability to bypass determined positions, but it also remains cognizant that writing's power is channeled and changed through the circuits of its material dissemination. What McDonald ultimately refers to as "literature's testing doubleness" and the "inescapable uncertainty of literature's fortunes" might be the testing doubleness of literary complementarity expressed by Mosley's "one or two." These one or two express the uncertain ends of texts and textual objects alike.

Mosley marvels at the book's circulation in the world, finding its tortuous paths similar to those he develops in *Catastrophe Practice*. In particular, Mosley wonders at the distant readers to whom his books find their way. In his autobiography, Mosley describes his difficulty in finding a publisher after completing *Catastrophe Practice*. Two of Mosley's former publishers had already rejected the book before Mosley's friend at Secker and Warburg accepted the book for publication. Just after Mosley talks about the process of finding a publisher, he takes the time to mention the followers his work has been acquiring:

> There were in fact a few other people at this time popping up in odd corners of the world who were showing an interest in what I was doing: this was an encouragement which counter-balanced the lack of interest in *Catastrophe Practice* at home. There were John Banks, a philosopher in Canada;

> John O'Brien, an editor and later publisher in America; Richard Murphet, a stage-producer in Australia. By what strange channels—underground or blown over the sea—had such seeds as I had cast out travelled![47]

Likening his works to seeds on the wind, Mosley compares the physical dispersal of his books across space to the "seeds," or ideas, Mosley finds circulating in his books. Like his ideas, his books are cast out and find their way to odd corners of the world. This is to say that his texts find their meaning, at least in part, through the strange channels that comprise the literary field.

Mosley's perception of literary endeavor emerges most clearly in his use of the term "practice," which he uses in an attempt to reconcile two conflicting notions in his thought. First, Mosley suggests that literature cannot determine its effects; one or two ideas get through, but the text cannot determine which. Second, Mosley maintains that literature has actual effects in the world, that it affects the way people think and live. Literature might even create nonprescriptive possibilities for change. To put this in Mosley's terms, seeds cannot simply blow around forever. If the conditions are right, some take root and grow. The impetus driving Mosley's writing thus originates in that long-standing question, McDonald's double challenge: Can literature claim detachment and still have effects? Mosley's answer comes in the form of practice. To encounter literature is to practice thought without knowing its effects. For Mosley, to practice thought without knowing the results in advance should not lead to resignation or helplessness, because one or two ideas get through. To put this differently, *to* practice occasionally becomes *a* practice. The proliferation of texts imprints, and bears the imprint of, literary practices. With *Catastrophe Practice*, Mosley turns his attention to the processes of practicing, riddling, poring over the text, and pouring through it. In doing so, he shows us how practicing becomes a practice in the multiple instantiations of *Catastrophe Practice*. In a way, the book bears witness to its own effects in the form of revisions, editions, and copyright dates, among other "bibliographical codes."[48] The book is multiple in that it collects diverse texts and genres, but also because it exists in multiple configurations.

In *The Book to Come* (French 1959; English 2003), Maurice Blanchot offers a critical reading of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* (1897), in English, *A Throw of the Dice*. In one of the final passages of the essay, Blanchot remarks upon Mallarmé's triumphant last line in which Mallarmé writes that "All Thought emits a Throw of Dice":

> That is the closure and the opening, the invisible passage where movement in the form of a sphere is end and beginning without end. Everything is finished and everything begins again. The Book is thus, subtly, affirmed in the *becoming* that is perhaps its meaning, a meaning that might be the very becoming of the circle. The end of the work is its origin, its new and old beginning: it is its possibility opened one more time.[49]

Blanchot proposes that the unknown future of the book to come opens the book to its own becoming. The throw of the dice that is both the closure of and the opening in the literary work is incorporated in *Catastrophe Practice*, which opens and closes a series and a circuit. Following from this, the circularity of Mosley's form and his revision of the initial book in the series affirm the becoming that is the book's meaning. The book finds its meaning by way of literary circulation because circulation both closes and opens the book to the world. Circulation specifies *the book*, but cannot specify its ends.

Mosley offers a useful reconsideration of *The Book to Come* by reflecting on the book in relation to literary practices. In his May 1988 letter to John O'Brien, Mosley delights in the fact that Dalkey Archive Press will publish the revised version of *Catastrophe Practice*: "It means a great deal to me that there will be an authentic version of *Catastrophe Practice* in existence. I would have had to gone back to it anyway, after the end of the four novels, and it is marvelous that I have this chance for the fed-back circuit to be in existence."[50] The fedback circuit, of course, is formed by literary practices. While Mosley would certainly subscribe to Blanchot's idea that the book is that which is its own becoming, a notion Mosley develops throughout *Catastrophe Practice*, he revises Blanchot's thought by suggesting that literary practices are complementary to the becoming of the book, an idea Blanchot leaves absent from his work.

Mosley's autobiographical reflection on the initial publication of *Hopeful Monsters* offers one last path with which to approach Mosley's work and its relation to literary practices. "When I had finished *Hopeful Monsters*," Mosley writes,

> it was an enormous book—the sort of book that sends publishers' hearts into their boots. But how otherwise could the novel itself be a hopeful monster? It seemed for a time that it might get lost down a coal-hole. Then suddenly—oh yes

> there were coincidences all right! A copy flipping here and there and landing on this or that desk—And there it was, winding its way like some great whale over rooftops.[51]

A great whale winding its way over rooftops? This is a strange channel indeed. But, more than that, the description calls forth the image of a massive body, the enormous book, finding its way into being and leaving a marvelous mess in its tracks. In this image, we find an encapsulation of Mosley's own body of work: it plays on the complementarity between a book and its becoming and, just as significantly, between the idea of literature and its practice.

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NOTES

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1. Nicholas Mosley to John O'Brien, 3 May 1988, box 41, folder 4, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* / Dalkey Archive Press: records, 1980–90, M507, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA.
2. For an elaboration of my brief allusion to Marshall McLuhan's famous pronouncement that "the medium is the message," see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; repr., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7–21. For scholarly commentary that considers the work of J[ohn] M. Coetzee in light of its production and circulation in a manner that adds to my reading of Mosley, see Rebecca Walkowitz, "Comparison Literature," *New Literary History* (*NLH*) 40 (2009): 567–82; see also Justin Neuman, "Unexpected Cosmopolitans: Media and Diaspora in J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime*," *Criticism* 53, no. 1 (2011): 127–36.
3. For clarity, I will use italics when referring to the book, *Catastrophe Practice*, while using roman for the Catastrophe Practice series.
4. Nicholas Mosley to John O'Brien, 6 April 1988, box 41, folder 4, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* / Dalkey Archive Press: records, 1980–90, M507, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA.
5. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, Classic, 20th-Century, Penguin Series (New York: Penguin, 1999), 3. "Commodius vicus" mixes bathroom humor (commode) with the circular philosophy of history developed by Giambattista Vico in *The New Science* (1725).
6. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 34.
7. Ibid., 115.

8. Perhaps the most well-known function of textual limitation is that of the "author" outlined by Michel Foucault in his essay "What Is an Author?" Foucault famously proclaims that an author is

> a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. . . . The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning. (in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Josué V. Harari [New York: Pantheon Books, 1984]: 101–20, quotation on 119)

While it is not the purpose of this essay to argue that Mosley overtly challenges the author function in the Catastrophe Practice series, Mosley certainly emphasizes "the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction," especially as those processes carry themselves out within his work and in his reflections on literary practice and production. Mosley, however, also understands that a text's manifestation is brought about by limitation. What does it mean then, Mosley asks, to consider the freedom of fiction in relation to the limitations through which it manifests itself?

9. For readings on world literature and literary circulation, see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M[alcom] B. DeBevoise, Convergences: Inventories of the Present, book 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* Translation/Transnation (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68; and Rebecca Walkowitz, "Unimaginable Largeness: Kazuo Ishiguro, Translation, and the New World Literature," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 40, no. 3 (2007): 216–39. For a literary–sociological approach, see James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Although Damrosch's and Walkowitz's arguments are particularly resonant in relation to Mosley's Catastrophe Practice series, especially Damrosch's claim in reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that world literature is "less a set of works than a network" (3), I will limit my use of their arguments in order to focus on Mosley's particular claims about literature and literary circulation.

10. In his essay "What Is the History of Books?" Robert Darnton proposes that the "life cycle" of a printed book "could be described as a communications circuit that runs from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader. . . . It transmits messages, transforming them en route, as they pass from thought to writing to printed characters and back to thought again." I argue that the logic of this transmission circuit manifests itself in the work of Nicholas Mosley (in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery [New York: Routledge, 2002], 9–26, quotation on 11).

11. Nicholas Mosley, *Catastrophe Practice*, British Literature Series (1991; repr., Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), vii.

12. Ibid., 237.

13. Ibid., 15.

14. Ibid., 169.

15. Ibid., 166.

16. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "metaphor," accessed 9 January 2013, http://www.oed.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/view/Entry/117328?redirectedFrom=metaphor.
17. Mosley, *Catastrophe Practice*, 167–68.
18. Nicholas Mosley, *Efforts at Truth: An Autobiography*, British Literature Series (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995).
19. Ibid., 275.
20. Gilbert Sorrentino to John O'Brien, 8 February 1974, box 1, folder 1, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* / Dalkey Archive Press: records, 1980–90, M507, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA.
21. John O'Brien, "A Conversation with Nicholas Mosley," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 2, no. 2 (1982): 58–79.
22. Mosley, *Catastrophe Practice*, 19.
23. Ibid., 229.
24. Allen Dunn, "Nicholas Mosley and the Art of the Accident," *Soundings* 93, nos. 3–4 (2010): 175–99, quotation on 175.
25. Mosley, *Catastrophe Practice*, v.
26. Ibid., 12.
27. Nicholas Mosley, *Hopeful Monsters*, British Literature Series (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), 29.
28. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "riddle, n.2," accessed 9 January 2013, http://www.oed.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/view/Entry/165632?rskey=vF5SAN&result=2&isAdvanced=false.
29. Mosley, *Catastrophe Practice*, 13.
30. Ibid., 49.
31. Ibid., 50.
32. David Kaiser, *How the Hippies Saved Physics: Science, Counterculture, and the Quantum Revival* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 9.
33. Ibid., 9–10.
34. Ibid., 8–9.
35. Mosley, *Hopeful Monsters*, 165.
36. Mosley, *Catastrophe Practice*, vii.
37. Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* trans. Nancy Ann Roth, Electronic Mediations, book 33 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 40.
38. Peter McDonald, "Ideas of the Book and Histories of Literature: After Theory?" *PMLA* 121, no. 1 (2006): 214–28, quotation on 222.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Johanna Drucker, "Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic Materiality to Probabilistic Materiality," *Parallax* 15, no. 4 (2009): 7–17, quotation on 7.
42. McDonald, "Ideas of the Book," 218.
43. Ibid., 222–23.

44. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
45. Flusser, *Does Writing?* 41.
46. McDonald, "Ideas of the Book," 226.
47. Mosley, *Efforts at Truth*, 287.
48. Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 13.
49. Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 243.
50. Mosley to O'Brien, 3 May 1988.
51. Mosley, *Efforts at Truth*, 333.